

Testimony of Prof. Jacqueline Shannon before the NYC Council Education oversight hearings on class size

February 28, 2020

Thank you, Chair Treyger for holding these important hearings today. My name is Jacqueline Shannon and I am an Associate Professor and the Department Chair of Early Childhood Education and Art Education at Brooklyn College.

In 2014, I helped write a letter to then-Chancellor Farina, warning her that the increases in class size that had occurred since 2007 in NYC public schools, particularly in the early grades of K-3, threatened to undermine the gains one might otherwise expect from the expansion of prekindergarten across the city.

This letter, which is attached to my testimony, was signed by over 70 professors of education, psychology, and sociology.¹ Sadly, we received no response from the Chancellor.

Since we sent this letter more than five years ago, the city has made very little progress in lowering class sizes, which are still far larger than they were in 2007, especially in the early grades.

Kindergarten through 3rd grade are those very years where the research is most crystal clear and convincing that class size has a strong determining effect on learning, especially for disadvantaged children and students of color. And yet the number of children in Kindergarten in classes of 25 or more has risen by 68% since 2007, and the number of 1st through 3rd graders of thirty or more has increased by nearly 3000%.²

Luckily, class sizes are strictly limited by state law for Pre-K; but none when they enter Kindergarten.³ The only limits on class size are the UFT contractual limits, which are far too large, and only inconsistently enforced.⁴

One of the best experimental studies of Pre-K recently concluded in Tennessee. Researchers from Vanderbilt University followed a thousand randomly selected, economically disadvantaged children from Pre-K through third grade, and compared them to a control group who did not attend Pre-K. Not only did children who missed Pre-K catch up within a year or two, but the children who attended Pre-K had fallen behind their peers on many achievement measures by the third grade.⁵

¹ <https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Letter-Reducing-Class-size-to-Farina.pdf> See also the oped here: Jacqueline Shannon and Mark Lauterbach: *Mayor De Blasio Must Put Reducing Class Sizes at Top of His Agenda.* SchoolBook, Nov. 6, 2014; <https://www.wnyc.org/story/opinion-de-blasio-must-put-reducing-class-size-first/>

² See the data summarized at <https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/citywide-class-size-updated-2.17.20.pptx>

³ The maximum legal size of preK classes in NY State is 20. In classes with 18 students or less, one teacher and one paraprofessional are required; for 19 or 20 students, there must be one teacher and two paraprofessionals assigned to each class. <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/upk/documents/151-1.pdf>

⁴ The UFT class size limits are: 25 students per class in Kindergarten, 32 in elementary grades, 33 in middle schools (30 in Title 1 middle schools), and 34 in high schools. See <https://www.uft.org/teaching/new-teachers/your-rights-new-members/class-size>

⁵ Mark W. Lipsey, Dale C. Farran, Kerry G. Hofer, "A Randomized Control Trial of a Statewide Voluntary Prekindergarten Program on Children's Skills and Behaviors through Third Grade," Peabody Research Institute of Vanderbilt University, 2015. https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/research/pri/VPKthrough3rd_final_withcover.pdf

The lead researchers of this Vanderbilt study were surprised. They have speculated about why the program failed to produce positive results. As co-investigator Dale Farran concluded:

Pre-K is a good start, but without a more coherent vision and consistent implementation of that vision, we cannot realistically expect dramatic effects...Too much has been promised from one year of preschool intervention without the attention needed to the quality of experiences children have and what happens to them in K-12."

The other co-investigator, Mark Lipsey, pointed out that the study raises important questions about what was happening in the other early grades to cause these students to fall behind:

"The biggest mystery here is what in the world is going on as these kids hit kindergarten, first, second, third grade, that is not building on what they seem to have come out of pre-K with?"⁶

There is no mystery as to what hits NYC children as they enter Kindergarten in our public schools. As we wrote in our letter to the Chancellor, in words that still hold true today:

New York City schools have the largest classes in the state and among the largest in the nation. We believe strongly that more equitable outcomes depend on more equity in opportunity. We commend you for your commitment to expanding prekindergarten programs, but as you know, early childhood education does not begin and end at age 4. We urge you now to focus on lowering class sizes in all grades, which will improve teaching and learning in our public schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today and I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.

September 22, 2014

Cc: Mayor de Blasio

Dear Chancellor Fariña:

We, the undersigned, professors and researchers, urge you to put forward an aggressive but practicable plan to reduce class size in NYC public schools. Last school year, class sizes were the largest in 15 years in grades K-3, and the largest since 2002 in grades 4-8. More than 330,000 children were sitting in classes of 30 or more, according to DOE data.

As you know, robust research shows that class size matters for all students, but particularly students at-risk of low achievement, including children of color, those in poverty, English language learners, and students with special needs. This is why class size reduction has been shown to be one of the few reforms to narrow the achievement gap.

Smaller classes have also been shown to increase student engagement, lower disciplinary referral and drop-out rates, and reduce teacher attrition. No teacher, no matter how skilled or well prepared, can be as effective in the large classes that exist in many of our city's public schools.

We believe that the benefits of many of the other positive reforms that the city is pursuing, such as increasing access to Universal prekindergarten, establishing community schools, and inclusion for students with disabilities, may be undermined unless the trend of growing class sizes is reversed and class sizes are lowered in the city's public schools.

⁶ Blake Farmer, "Vanderbilt's Unflattering Pre-K Study Strikes A Nerve, But What Does It Really Say?" Nashville Public Radio, September 28, 2015. <http://nashvillepublicradio.org/post/vanderbilt-s-unflattering-pre-k-study-strikes-nerve-what-does-it-really-say#stream/0>

In particular, placing students with special needs into classes of 25, 30 or more will not work to serve their individual needs, no less the needs of the other students in the class.

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We urge you now to focus on lowering class sizes in all grades, which will improve teaching and learning in our public schools.

Yours sincerely,

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